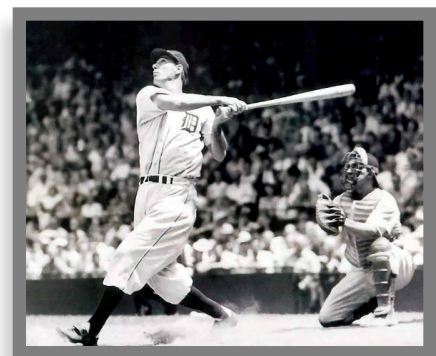


GRAMPA DON A BASEBALL STORY

Long ago, somewhere back in the middle-1960s, a sequence of events involving Grampa Don and professional baseball's Milwaukee Braves created a ripple which resonates to this day. It all begins with ... well, it is difficult to say precisely where it all begins, but for the sake of brevity, this story starts with your Grampa Don and his Uncle, Allan Elger.

Allan Elger was brother to your Great Grandmother (on your Grampa's side) - Ruth (Elger) Hartman. Little is known about Uncle Allan, although he does appear to have been something of an athletic Phenom (pronounced fee-nom) in his own time, that being the 1930s through the 1940s and 50s. By the time I became aware of Uncle Allan, he'd suffered some sort of career-ending injury to his back, leaving him with a hitch in his git-along.



Uncle Allan, being a family man and wise (not unlike your dad) realized he was not going to earn his way through life as an athlete. However, he was certain that toiling in and around athletics would be an enjoyable way to earn a living. Eventually, Uncle Allan earned a job with the Milwaukee Braves baseball organization, working as a scout, seeking talented young men to play in the Big Show.

The Milwaukee Braves had won World Series championship in 1957 and had players like Hall-of-Famers Hank Aaron, pitchers Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette ... athletes who defined baseball in their era. Your Grampa Don's Uncle Allan held the keys to the Magic Kingdom. And guess what?

One summer, somewhere back in the middle-1960s, your Grampa Don received an invitation from the Milwaukee Braves baseball organization to come out to Milwaukee County Stadium, the Braves' home field. There would be tryouts, with the Braves Coaching Staff overlooking the potential. Grampa Don was to bring his glove, his spikes and a cap, if he felt so inclined.



If memory serves, Granpa Don, Great Granny Hartman, Great Aunt Jackie, Great Aunt Mary and me, Great Uncle John, (Great Aunt Jayne – may God rest – hadn't yet been born) all piled onto the Milwaukee Road passenger train in St. Paul, Minnesota. We rode the rails to Milwaukee, where we were picked-up by your Great Great Granny Elger (mother to Great Granny Ruth (Elger) Hartman and to Uncle Allan) who proceeded to drive us to her home in Waukesha, Wisconsin, a suburb to Milwaukee, not far from Milwaukee County Stadium, where Grampa Don was to hold his baseball tryout for the Braves.



Great Great Granny Elger lived in an apartment above she and (Great Great Grampa Elger's butcher shop. Great Granny Hartman often told stories of the Hobos (homeless and unemployed) who would knock at the back door of Great Great Granny's butcher shop, seeking food.

This took place during the Depression which occurred between the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the start of World War II, when unemployment stood at 25% and times were really difficult.

At any rate, on the day of Grampa Don's tryout at Milwaukee County Stadium, Grampa Don was up bright and early. He was utterly nervous and enormously excited as you might well imagine. So much so that he applied endless coats of Neatsfoot Oil to his already well-lubed baseball glove, a Mini Minoso model from 1962. In case you were wondering, Neatsfoot is a yellowish oil rendered and purified from the shin bones and feet (but not the hooves) of cattle.



If memory serves, Grampa Don ran out of Neatsfoot oil and was seen tying and re-tying his cleats to pass slow-moving time. Wisely, Grampa Don understood that losing one's cleats while attempting to influence professional Scouts as to one's competence can never be a good thing. Grampa Don's cleats were not about to come off.



That was, until Great Great Granny Elger told Great Granny Hartman, Great Auntie Jackie, Great Auntie Mary, Great Uncle John and Granpa Don to get in the car. "We're off to Milwaukee County Stadium," Great Great Granny Elger said. Looking directly at Grandpa Don, whose cleats were tied tightly, Great Great Granny Elger said, "You may not wear those baseball shoes in the car. You'll shred the carpet."



Eventually we made it to Milwaukee County Stadium. Grampa Don was beside himself. Both Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette were rumored to be in the stadium for the tryout event. Between the two of these fearsome pitchers Spahn and Burdette had combined for 42 victories the year before. The Braves were a serious business. Slackers were not invited.

Because only those asked to tryout were allowed inside Milwaukee County Stadium that day, I am unable to report precisely how it is that Grampa Don performed. I do not know if Grampa Don made contact with the ball. I do not know if Warren Spahn said, while watching Grampa Don in the batting cage, "Hey, this kid has potential." Or did Lew Burdette, the only pitcher ever to throw a no-hitter in the World Series, say, "I don't know. He's a sucker for that knuckleball."

After a few hours, as the rest of us awaited Grampa Don's baseball future out in the parking lot of Milwaukee County Stadium, we saw the backlit figures of Uncle Allan, his arm draped over the shoulder of an ebullient Grampa Don, as they strolled out the Player's Exit. Grampa Don never spoke of his experience that day, or perhaps he told us but we just couldn't understand. My suggestion? The next time you see Grampa Don, ask him about the time he tried to break into the Bigs. You might be surprised to hear his version of events.

